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AUTHOR Carver, Rebecca L.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined experiential education programs in terms of how they developed participants' personal agency, sense of belonging, and levels of competence. Personal agency empowers students to become change agents in their lives and communities; sense of belonging enables participants to see themselves as members of a community with rights and responsibilities; and developing competence involves learning new skills, acquiring knowledge, and applying what was learned. Research sites were selected that had institutional norms compatible with the principles of experiential education and offered multicultural populations of inner-city youth ample opportunity to gain exposure to the organization (usually several years). Sites included a professionally operated newspaper staffed almost entirely by youth, a performing arts center located in the heart of an inner-city neighborhood, a local chapter of a national organization with the mission of empowering girls and young women, and an organization staffed mostly by teenagers and young adults serving youth infected or affected by the HIV virus. Data included observations of organizational activities over a 10-week period, informal and formal interviews with youth and staff, and products created at the sites. The remainder of the report summarizes normal everyday events at these organizations; documents how the organizations are effective in promoting agency, belonging, and competence among participants and staff; and includes information on sponsoring organization, student population, project goals, and program components. (LP)

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# When The ABCs That Students Learn Are Agency, Belonging, and Competence

Rebecca Carver

Presented at AERA 1997

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# When The ABCs That Students Learn Are Agency, Belonging, and Competence

**B-ckground Information**

The work presented in this paper represents a sub-set of findings from a long-term study of experiential education and its implementation in community-based organizations that engage multicultural populations of teenagers and young adults. In addition to working toward a better understanding of what "experiential education" means, how it is implemented, and what results in terms of student experience, the project served as a vehicle for the development of a conceptual framework that provides a systemic model for investigating any educational enterprise. The framework was initially based on a literature review and preliminary field work then modified to accommodate findings of this study. The literature reviewed addresses "experiential education" practice and theory as well as relevant topics in education policy, school reform, developmental and social psychology, cognitive science and philosophy. The initial framework was also informed by a pilot study, a review of more than ten additional programs, and an exercise designed as a validity check that engaged 30 experiential educators from different organizations.

The following definition of experiential education and description of implications discussed in the subsequent paragraph were derived for this study and first appeared in *Theory for practice: A Framework for thinking about experiential education* (Carver, 1996).

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> Experiential education is education (the leading of students through a process of learning) that makes conscious application of the students' experiences by integrating them into the curriculum. Experience involves any combination of senses (i.e., touch, smell., hearing, sight, taste), emotions (e.g., pleasure., excitement, anxiety, fear, hurt, empathy, attachment), physical condition (e.g., temperature, strength, energy level), and cognition (e.g., constructing knowledge, establishing beliefs, solving problems).

Experiential education is holistic in the sense that it addresses students in their entirety -- as thinking, feeling, physical, emotional, spiritual and social beings. Students are viewed as valuable resources for their own education, the education of others and the well-being of the communities of which they are members. Although formal educators become senior members of learning communities, students share in the process of teaching, and teachers actively continue to learn from their experiences with the group.

Research sites were chosen for this study based on two broad sets of criteria. First, the institutional norms of the organizations had to be compatible with experiential education. Second, the sites had to offer multi-cultural populations of inner-city youth ample opportunity to gain exposure to the offerings of the organization over an extended period of time (usually more several years). The research sites are[1]:

> *Write On!* -- a professionally operated newspaper that is staffed almost entirely by youth (i.e., all of the writers and artists, some of the editorial staff, artists, public relations personnel, writing coaches and educational program leaders are teenagers and young adults).

*Mosaic Center for the Performing Arts* -- a performing arts center located in the heart of an inner-city neighborhood and open to people of all ages and cultural backgrounds where classes take place, ensembles meet to practice, dance and theater performances are given, and video projects that convey the perspectives of youth writers are produced.

*National Organization for Female Youth* -- a local chapter of a national organization with the mission of empowering girls and young women, this organization offers workshops, long-term programs, support groups and mentorship in areas ranging from career planning to competitive sports, values clarifications and social action to nutrition, mathematics and architecture.

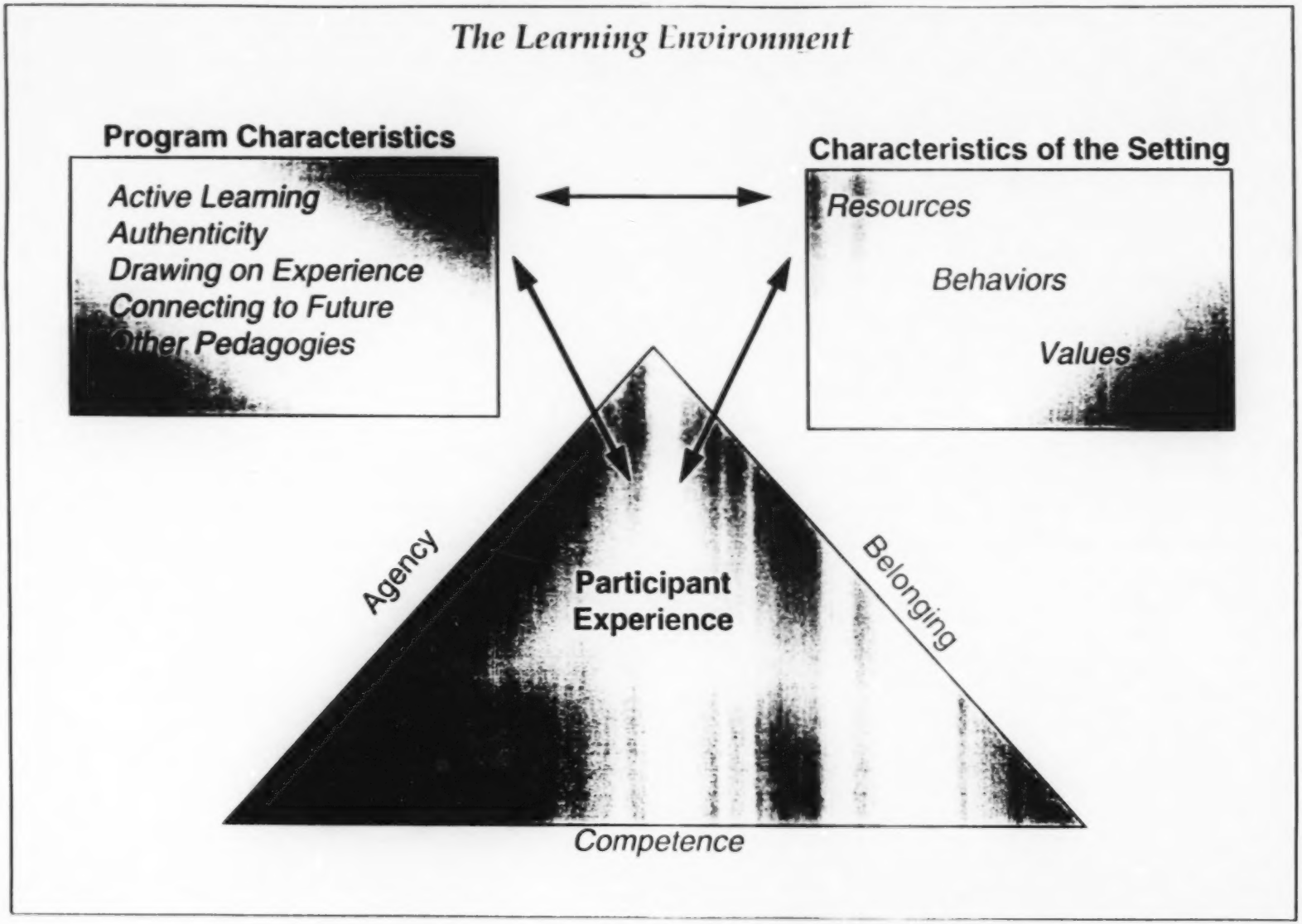
*Youth Health Advocates* -- staffed almost entirely by professionals in their late teens and early twenties, this organization serves youth who are infected or affected by the HIV virus by offering educational programs and opportunities for involvement in political advocacy and public relations campaigns.

Observations of activities over a ten week period of time, informal and formal interviews with youth and staff, products created at the sites and documentation of the organizations were used for data. Analyses privileged the interview data although interpretations were supported by the knowledge gained from other sources. Non-numerical Unindexed Data* Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (NUD*IST) software enabled more efficient and thorough analysis than would otherwise have been possible during the time-frame of this study.

## A Conceptual Framework for Thinking About Experiential Education

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that emerged over the course of this study.[ii]

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Experiential Education





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*Student Experience*

There are three goals of experiential education and three corresponding dimensions of student experience. They are inter-related and mutually reinforcing. In fact, they are inseparable in reality, but it is possible to make conceptual distinctions for the purpose of gaining some clarity as to the complex nature of student experience. The goals are to develop participants' personal agency, sense of belonging, and levels of competence. Hence, the ABCs that students learn when experiential education is effectively implemented are Agency, Belonging and Competence.

***The ABCs of Student Experience***

A represents the developing of students' personal **agency** - - allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities, increasing students' recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity.

B refers to the development and maintenance of a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of **belonging** - - in which they see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power, and vulnerability and learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole.

C stands for **competence**, referring to the development of student competence (which usually coincides with the development of teacher competence) in a wide variety of areas (cognitive, physical, musical, social, et cetera). Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned.

My description of student experience being bounded by the dimensions of ABC is closely related to the descriptions that researchers conducting markedly different types of studies identified as key dimensions of youth experience in educational settings. As one example, Milbrey McLaughlin and Shirley Brice Heath discovered that "autonomy, belonging, and competence" characterize the key dimensions of student experience in community-based organizations that are successful at helping inner-city youth "dodge the bullets" (literally and figuratively) that threaten their safety and well-being (unpublished). As another example, James Wellborn and James Connell identified "autonomy, relatedness, and competence" as psychological dimensions that must be addressed in order to develop a healthy self-concept (1991). McLaughlin is an educational researcher, Heath is an anthropologist, Wellborn and Connell are motivational psychologists. The ABCs that I identified, although closely related to the findings of these researchers, were derived from an exploration of what experiential educational enterprises attended to and what needs seemed to be met by satisfied participants.[iii]

*Pedagogical Principles*

> **Authenticity:** activities and consequences are understood by participants as relevant to their lives. Rewards are naturally occurring and directly affect the experience of the student (e.g., personal satisfaction) Students can identify reasons for participating in activities. Assessment is formative. The programs provide meaningful experiences within the context of the students' outlook on life.

**Active learning:** students are physically and/or mentally engaged in the active process of learning. These activities are used to address social, physical and emotional as well as cognitive development. The difference between mentally active learning and passive learning is that the former requires students to internalize the thought processes necessary for problem solving -- searching for explanations, figuring out ways of understanding, using imagination and being creative -- whereas the latter involves accepting what is said and remembering it, so it can be repeated later.

**Drawing on student experience:** students are guided in the process of building understandings of phenomena, events, human nature, et cetera by thinking about what they have experienced (i. e. what happened to them, how they felt, how they reacted, what resulted, what they observed). Educators create activities that provide opportunities for students to experience what it is like to interact with specific situations. They draw on both experiences students bring with them to a program and those that are shared by participants in programs.

**Providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity:** students develop habits, memories, skills and knowledge that will be useful to them in the future. The formal process of getting students to reflect on their participation in activities or to reflect on their potential roles as community members is meant to make these experiences relevant to their future endeavors.

This list is not exhaustive. Nor is it self-evident how or when these principles should be used in combination with one another. The principles listed above are, however, common enough in experiential education enterprises to be among the defining characteristics of these organizations and programs.

The presence and interaction among resources, behaviors, and values that characterize an experiential education setting are shaped by an overarching (albeit sometimes implicit) goal that I have named "positive socialization" that means to benefit all individual students and the societies of which they are a part. People who design and implement coherent programs of experiential education act on implicit agreements about what constitutes positive socialization. As an example, an objective may be to provide youth opportunities to develop skills that will allow them to become economically self-sufficient. This fits under the umbrella of positive socialization if the design team and program staff share an understanding that economic self-sufficiency is in the best interest of both the individual students and the societies of which these students are a part.

*Background/Foreground Characteristics*

> **Values** that are common if not universally acted upon in places where Agency, Belonging and Competence are developed include: active caring; compassion; communication; critical thinking; respect for self and others, and the environment; creativity; inclusivity; spiritual, physical and mental health; community; and lifelong learning.
>
> **Resources** that are identified, obtained, distributed and shared to make experiential education successful includes time, space, authority, power, respect and other intangibles as well as money and physical objects. Notably, youth and other participants are treated as valuable resources, as are their experiences.
>
> **Behaviors** of senior members in a learning community (teachers and/or students who are viewed as successful and have been around for a while) can signal newer members by modeling what is acceptable and being responsive to their actions. Conscious attempts by any member to act in accordance with the belief that the above mentioned values are important further cultivates learning environments in which the development of student Agency, Belonging and Competence are fostered.

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**Focusing on the ABCs of Student Experience**

Youth at all four sites talk about what they learn (the development of competence), the relationships they establish (with accompanying sense of belonging), and ways they have gained more control of their lives (becoming more effective change agents). Staff talk about how they and the youth with whom they work become empowered (develop agency), care for and connect with one another (develop a sense of belonging), and learn both skills and knowledge (increasing their competence). The ABC model for looking at student experience seems to do justice to the perspectives of both staff and youth. The descriptions from insiders also underscore the contention that student experience is both a process (in which students interact with their environments) and an outcome (that results from these interactions). The examples given in this and the following three sections of the paper are meant to illustrate normal, everyday events at these organizations (rather than those which are exceptional). All program, organization, and person's names have been changed to ensure confidentiality of subjects in this study.

**The Female Youth Initiative[iv]**
**(FYI)**

***Sponsoring Organization:*** Youth Health Advocates, a community based organization that sponsors health education programs for youth.

***Student Population:*** The FYI team consists of a self-selected group of 15 female teenagers. The group includes inner-city gang members and suburban youth; teenage parents and lesbians; youth with varying amounts of schooling and with different linguistic backgrounds -- several are Latina.

*Project Goals:* One goal is for the FYI team (consisting of program participants and staff) to produce a resource guide that provides information to a broader community of girls and young women about health care issues and services. The guide will include photographs, stories and facts as well as reviews of health care agencies from the perspectives of a culturally diverse group of young women. Integrated into the goal of producing the resource guide is the goal of providing the FYI team with a valuable educational experience. The aim of the project director is to empower these young women -- through education and opportunities for self-expression -- to feel better about themselves and have more control over their own health and welfare.

*Components of the Program:* The FYI team is engaged in three major types of activities: creative writing, health education and an evaluation of health care centers. For health education, they meet on Tuesday evenings. Topics covered include, but are not limited to, anatomy, female and male physiology, "HIV 101", the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. Creative writing sessions, guided by a professional writing teacher, take place on Saturdays when a safe space is created for personal expression about topics that range from body image and personal identity to relationships and sexual abuse. Finally, to conduct the evaluation of health care centers, FYI team members visit health care centers as clients and produce evaluation reports. The Female Youth Initiative is a five-month project.

The Female Youth Initiative empowers teenagers and young adults to: protect and improve their physical and mental health, increase their awareness of health issues, wage political battles to improve health care for youth, and reduce the isolation felt by young people who are HIV positive.

The dual aim of the FYI project is to empower these young women -- through education and opportunities for self-expression -- to feel better about themselves and have more control over their own health and welfare while at the same time allowing them to make a contribution to their communities by offering information and education to other young women. The

integration of service and learning combined with the manner in which participants are respected as valuable resources and empowered to take initiative in the process of becoming change agents in their communities makes this project a strong example of how service learning programs implement the principles of experiential education.

The educational value of an experience is derived from the way the experience contributes to the students' development as well as the immediate nature of students' relationships with their environment (Dewey, 1938). It takes into consideration not only the explicit curriculum but also the lessons people acquire by participating in activities. For instance, the FYI participants may learn that they are good writers and that anatomy is interesting as well as learning specific rules of grammar or names of body parts. Dewey calls the learning that is not the result of an explicit lesson "collateral learning" (1938). Collateral learning and formal curriculum are the substance of students' learning.

At the Female Youth Initiative, the intuition of staff is consistent with the theory of Dewey. The project director invited youth to participate in a project that engages them in their own health education and leaves them with both valuable knowledge and the satisfaction of having created a resource guide that will be useful to other members of their community. In these ways, she provides educational opportunities for youth by fostering learning experiences that are positive not only in their present forms but also because of what youth take away from them.

FYI staff lead students through a follow-up activity known as "processing" the experience.[v] Processing an experience involves creating an interpretation of what

happened and reflecting on potential lessons at hand. This influences the nature and intensity of the experience's impact on students. Formal processing often takes place in groups, with instructors acting as facilitators. Using the Socratic method, an instructor can have a powerful influence on the development of group norms.[vi] The manner in which key concepts are defined by the group affects what its members learn.[vii] For instance, the way that the concept "health" is understood by staff and participants of the Female Youth Initiative plays a big role in decisions about curriculum covered and the slant with which information is presented. The working understandings of key concepts are picked up by participants by way of collateral learning. They can also be addressed explicitly. In the FYI program, the creative writing sessions serve as a place for guided reflection and the processing of experiences.

The Female Youth Initiative allows participants to learn about writing, health care and conducting evaluations ( areas of competence). It invites young women to become part of a group that can provide support for its members (a sense of belonging). It also attends to their need for autonomy, but when it comes to experiential education, what is more to the point is the way participants combine autonomy and relatedness to become effective change agents and form networks of interdependency. In the framework, I use the terms Agency, Belonging, and Competence to represent the salient aspects of what students experience.
FYI participants become change agents in their communities by producing a book that increases the access young women have to information about health and health

FYI participants become change agents in their communities by producing a book that increases the access young women have to information about health and health services. The initiative that FYI participants take is a sign of autonomy and an ingredient of exercising agency.

Figure 2 shows some examples of the ABCs that FYI participants develop. Figure 3 shows some of the pedagogical principles that support the development of participants' ABCs. Figure 4 shows some of the specific foreground and background characteristics of the learning environment of the FYI program. A special category of characteristics has been added to figure 4 that does not appear in figure 1, namely Language. Language is a resource, and the use of it is a form of behavior, while indicated by it are values shared and accepted in the learning environment.

"Participant experience" in the model of education that evolved over the course of this study refers to the experiences of both official and unofficial "students." For instance, in the case of the Female Youth Initiative, staff as well as participants develop competence (learning from youth, other instructors, and the practice of teaching). Staff become part of the group (belonging). They develop their own agency by working with youth (to serve their communities and support youth development). Often, in experiential education, and especially in organizations that promote youth development, program participants are referred to as "participants" not "students" and all members of the learning community that includes participants and staff of the organizations are expected to view themselves, at times, as students.

Figure 2: Examples of ABCs at the Female Youth Initiative

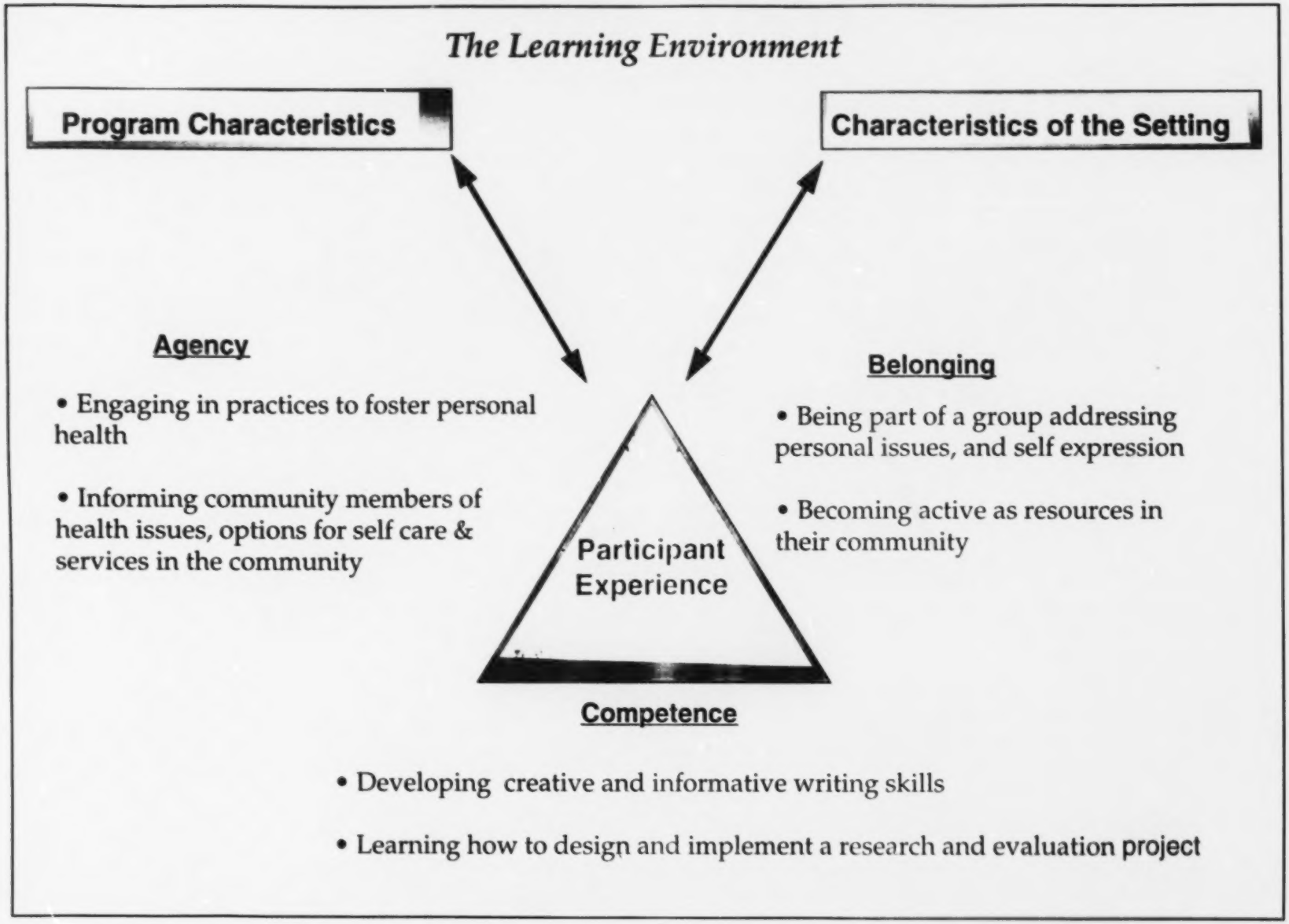
The Learning Environment
Program Characteristics
Characteristics of the Setting
Agency
• Engaging in practices to foster personal health
• Informing community members of health issues, options for self care & services in the community
Belonging
• Being part of a group addressing personal issues, and self expression
• Becoming active as resources in their community
Participant Experience
Competence
• Developing creative and informative writing skills
• Learning how to design and implement a research and evaluation project



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Figure 3 : Examples of Program Characteristics at FYI

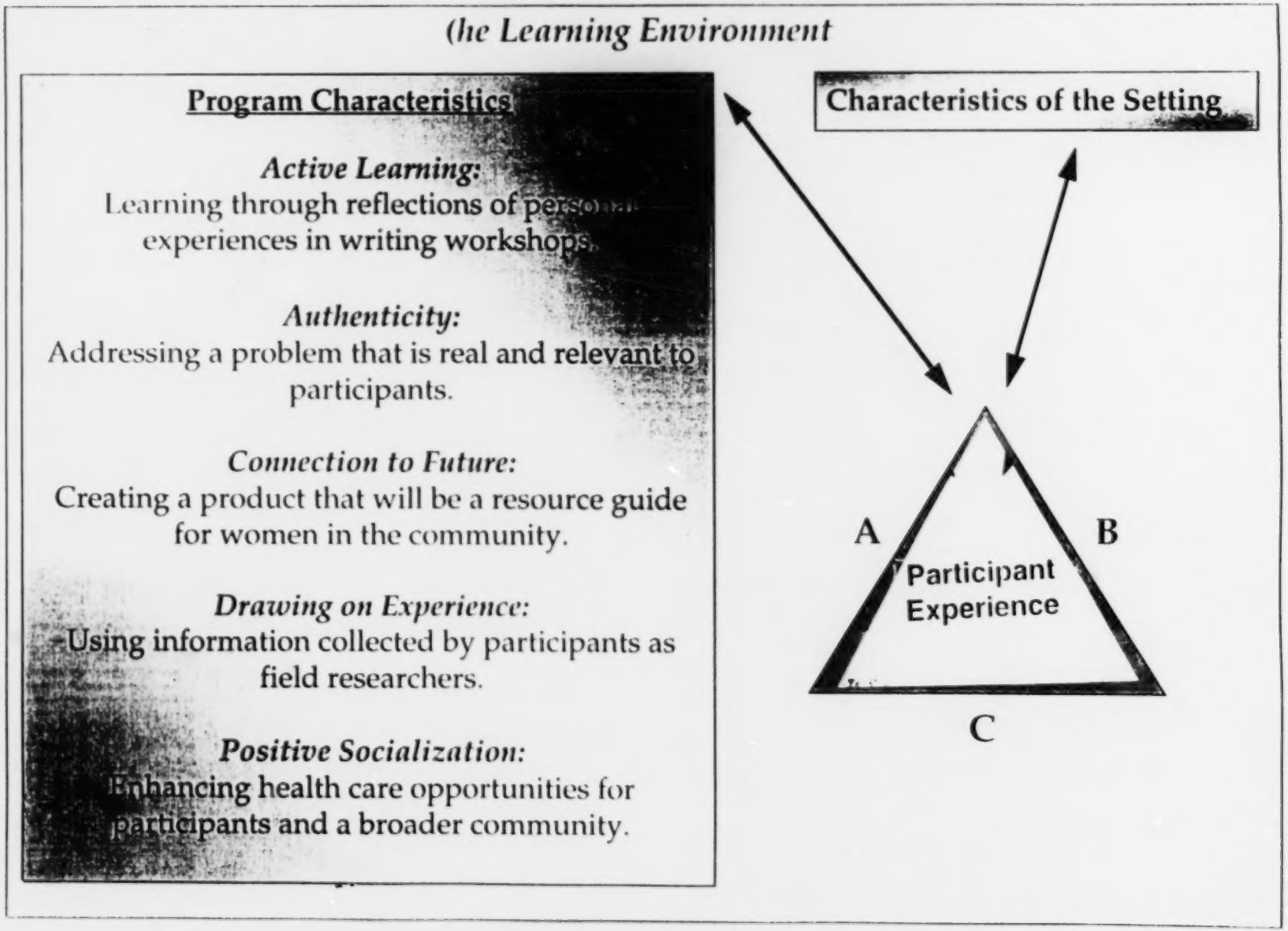
The Learning Environment
Program Characteristics
Active Learning:
Learning through reflections of personal experiences in writing workshops.
Authenticity:
Addressing a problem that is real and relevant to participants.
Connection to Future:
Creating a product that will be a resource guide for women in the community.
Drawing on Experience:
Using information collected by participants as field researchers.
Positive Socialization:
Enhancing health care opportunities for participants and a broader community.
Characteristics of the Setting
A
B
Participant Experience
C



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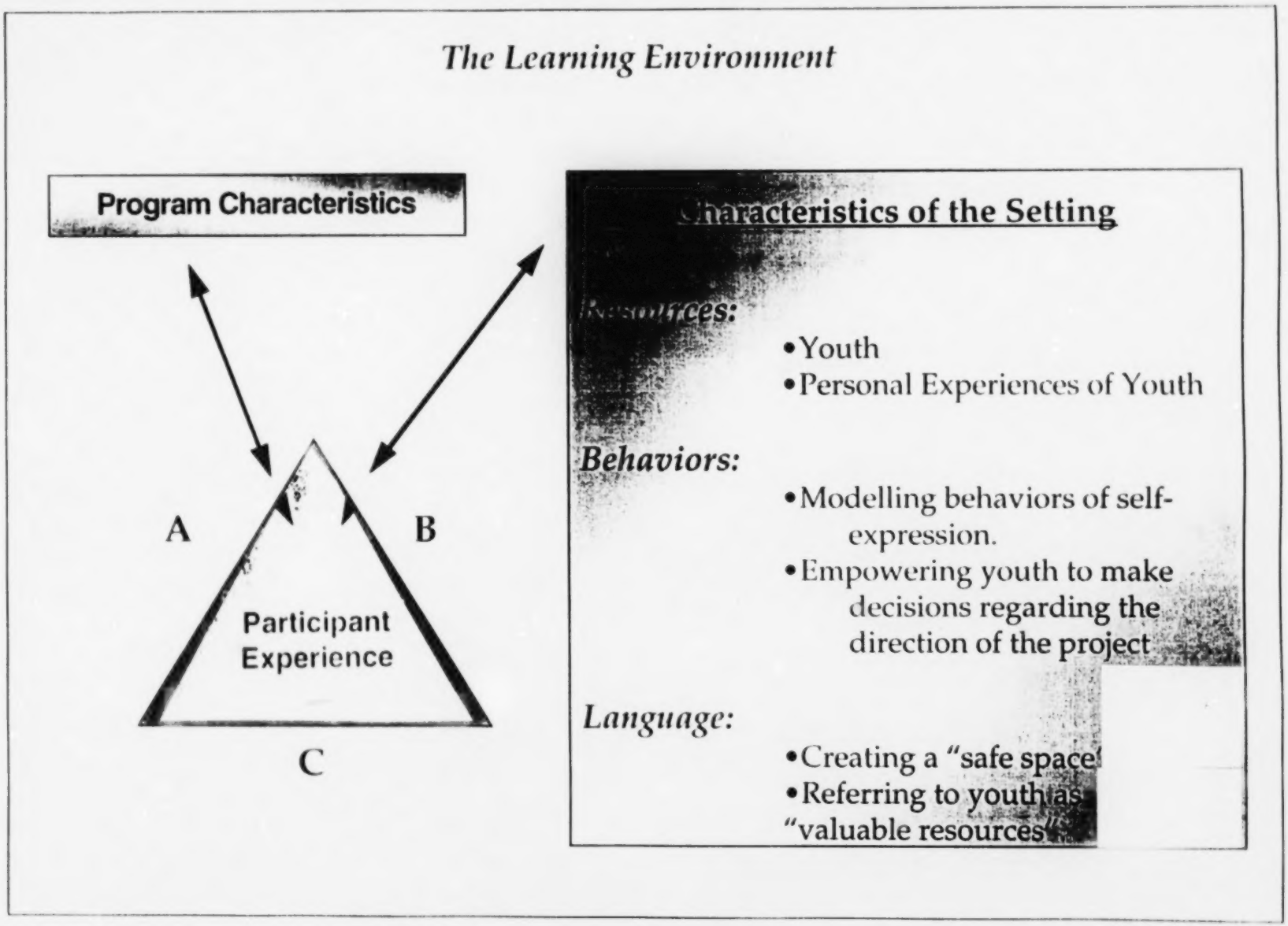
Figure 4: Examples of Characteristics of the Setting at FYI



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## Agency

Developing agency means maximizing the utility of one's internal locus of control while recognizing and appreciating the relationships among the internal and external factors that affect her/his life circumstances. Furthermore, developing agency means learning through practice to use of this knowledge as a source of power that fuels actions that are taken, assessed, and adapted to continue the process of asserting and satisfying needs and desires. Put another way, developing agency means becoming more of a change agent in a community or situation, and more of a primary change agent in one's own life.

Although Agency can be thought of as a continuum along which people move in the context of given situations, the movement may not be linear and the ends of the continuum are ideal rather than real. If Competence is developed but Agency is not, participants of education programs may become more competent at performing tasks, but they will not become better at adapting these tasks to new situations or deciding when to discontinue the practices learned in favor of alternative methods, or become better able to identify what they want to get out of a situation, how to achieve this, and then to do so. When people develop a sense of Belonging but not a sense of Agency, they become dependent on the group to which they belong to satisfy needs rather than recognizing that they can participate in creating and supporting social environments in which these needs may be met.

*June 26, 1995 --National Organization for Female Youth:*
*A session for second-year participants taught by Kate and Amara*

*. . . Amara takes the floor to teach a lesson about goal setting.*

*She writes on the flip chart:*

***Goal Setting***
*S*
*M*
*A*
*R*
*T*
*+*

*After asking girls what makes a good goal, and working from their answers, she completes her chart to show considerations for goal setting. She spells out:*

*Specific*
*Measurable*
*Attainable*
*Risk*
*Timetable*

*and next to the +, she writes: "always state your goal in a positive term." Girls each write about a goal that they have. Amara uses their examples, with their permission, to check and see if they meet each of the criteria for setting "SMART +" goals, and to clarify what each key word on the chart refers to. Amara is teaching this faster than she usually does because of time constraints. She acknowledges this.*

*Amara puts on music and asks for everyone to take turns walking from point A (in one corner of the room) to point B (diagonally across the room) in her own way. Kids have fun with this, experimenting with ways of moving and performing in front of each other as ways of expressing something about themselves. Amara asks the kids why they think she had them do this exercise and facilitates their process of talking about how everyone has to find her own way of reaching her goals and how there are many ways to get there, even for a given person.*

Amara was working with the young women on a process of setting goals that are important to them. Some were long-term goals and others were short-term goals. Students were able to get Amara's assistance with setting particular goals that could provide some guidance -- something for each girl to aim for, and ways to assess whether they are on track. Beyond that, they were working on identifying, refining, and practicing the use of a tool (goal setting) within themselves that can help them take initiative to get what they want out of life. They were encouraged, explicitly and implicitly, to take responsibility. Although Amara wants students to feel comfortable with each other and with her, their joint endeavors and common experiences point toward individual strength and independence. When a group develops belonging and agency, interdependence results -- neither dependence nor co-dependence nor pure autonomy.

*Processes*

Youth become more adept at being positive and effective change agents in their own lives and in their communities by taking active roles in these communities and through the following practices:

- Facing challenges;
- Choosing battles;
- Developing understandings of opportunities and phenomena
- Identifying, expressing, confronting and overcoming fears; and

- Developing a support structure.

These are not mutually exclusive categories. Stretching involves both building on strengths and overcoming weaknesses. Fears are a form of weakness that may be overcome by facing challenges. Deciding to confront a fear is an example of choosing a battle. The process of confronting a fear may coincide with the process of developing support mechanisms either internally (i.e., coping strategies) or externally (i.e., patterns of communication with people who offer support). The categories are often mutually reinforcing but each one is worth identifying because of their generative value for understanding what opportunities can contribute to the development of student agency.

*Outcomes*

The results of the processes described above include an increase in self-awareness and personal knowledge, increased self confidence, skill development, deeper understandings, and greater abilities to apply lessons that were learned to future situations. All of the above mentioned outcomes are also the results of developing competence.

The habits of perception, behavior, attitude and emotional response, as Dewey said, are affected by the experiences people have. In cases where there are marked improvements in the development of agency, people are encouraged to take both risks and precautions that allow them to balance a

desire to achieve high standards and a need to take care of themselves. Developing agency does not mean "getting more of it"; the result is qualitative, not quantitative. Throughout a person's life, situations are continuously changing and people are faced with the challenge of adapting to their new situations. As agency is developed, the ability to adapt, and either maintain or increase one's role as a change agent in one's own life continues.

*Support Mechanisms*

Youth are both encouraged and enabled to develop agency when they have opportunities to:

- challenge themselves on a regular basis;
- participate in a diversity of interesting experiences;
- access the resources (e.g., active listeners, language, and media for self-expression) to critically assess the connections between their thoughts, beliefs, previous experiences, present feelings, ideas to which they are being exposed and anticipated future challenges;
- receive guidance from respected people who help facilitates their processes of discovery and self assessment; and
- feel emotionally and physically safe so as to acquire the faith, and trust in people around them, such that it is not unhealthy to step outside of their comfort zone.

this means that these characteristics are not only present in the environment but are present in the perception youth have of it. In other words, these opportunities are only accessible to youth in situations where they can see that it is

there, make sense of it in the context of their lives, and believe that they can take advantage of them.

The subtle processes of cultivating a learning environment in which youth develop a sense of agency includes providing informal and formal structures that allow staff to provide guidance both when youth are acquiring skills and when they are reflecting on what they have been doing. Providing effective opportunities for youth to draw on experiences implies giving them space to explore and come to recognize their own misconceptions as they adapt their thoughts to accommodate for newly acquired information. The support that youth accept from staff can be physical, emotional, cognitive and/or social. Providing youth with opportunities to experience success is one of the great gifts that experiential educators offer program participants. This is not done by making "challenges" less challenging; it is done by providing enough support that youth have the opportunity to accomplish what they did not think they would be able to do; and/or guiding youth through the activity of "processing an experience" in a manner that results in their perceiving the experience as one of success.

**Belonging**

Finding a place in a community that is big enough for movement, comfortable enough for individual needs to be met, and allows a person to balance serving oneself and taking responsibility as a group member, is what developing belonging is all about. Kurt Hahn, drawing on Plato's ideas about how to educate people for a just society, and John Dewey in considering what

it would take to educate citizens of a strong democracy, both point to the need for students to be related to as both individuals and group members (James, 1980; James, 1990; Dewey, 1902, Dewey, 1938).

The following event shows how Nancy, the founding director of Write On! fosters the development of belonging for and among youth participating in a weekly meeting.

*July 24, 1995 -- Write On! (The News Paper)*
*Monday Meeting*

*". . . I want to go around the room and get your personal experience," says Nancy, setting the tone for the discussion about Affirmative Action. "The missing perspective in the newspapers is from young persons." She begins to go around the room, asking each young person in turn for their experiences and whether axing Affirmative Action at U. C. Berkeley will affect them. Everyone else is quiet and attentive, which is remarkable because the tension is building between the group's effort to maintain order and individuals' urges to speak their minds.*

*"Good," says Nancy after taking an opinion from one young person, and as she turns to the next she says, "I don't know you." A young white woman introduces herself and begins to speak. "What I want is for you to talk from your own experiences," Nancy reminds the speaker and group as a whole.*

*A couple of young men look like they are ready to explode with their comments. The young woman beside me asks to borrow a pen and paper so she can jot down her ideas. Jade talks about being pushed by a high school guidance counselor to apply to a junior college instead of applying for admittance to a four year college; she associates this with her being black.*

*Some hands go up and a couple of people begin to speak out of turn, which infuriates others. Some of the comments interjected are in the form of questions for those who are speaking but others are not. It is the "boys" who are speaking out of turn."[iii] The young woman beside me is frustrated by this.*

*Michael and Jamal have moved from one side of the room to the other so that their turns to speak will come sooner. Nancy and the others note this maneuver and try not to acknowledge their new positions. They get some words in anyway. "This is an emotional issue," says Michael. By this time people are speaking on top of one another. One young man says that he's "raising hell because its real. Every time a black man speaks his mind, they think he's going crazy." Nancy is still acknowledging comments from youth as she attempts to go back and forth between going around the circle and attending to the outbursts.*

*A young black man says that he thinks he's been abusing Affirmative Action because he went to the best schools. " I will take what I can get," he says.*

*"That's very well said," responds Nancy. He adds that he'd like to see Affirmative Action based on economics. A young woman says that Indian is lumped under Asian as a classification.*

*. . . Its 6:00. Nancy says that she wants to make sure "we all leave here feeling okay." She encourages youth to write stories about their experiences with Affirmative Action. The people who had taken their troubles into the hall are drifting back in. The young woman who was sitting next to me is talking with Jamal, who had angered her. She kisses him on the cheek and hugs another of "the boys."*

The discipline problems arose because people were so excited about participating, not because they were struggling to avoid participating in an activity sponsored by this organization. There appears to be a lack of boundaries between formal and informal meetings; education, and personal ideas; work, schooling, and life in the context of participants' experiences at Write On! Once the official conversation ended, it continued among some, and several youth choose to "hang" around.

Nancy's welcoming of youth includes her asking for their ideas, acknowledging their presence, and being sure to meet newcomers -- having

them introduce themselves as well as speaking with them afterwards. Nancy makes a couple of overt tone-setting statements. She says that what is missing is the perspectives of these young people (i.e., their thoughts, experiences and feelings are important and she, as an ambassador of adults, wants to hear them). She says that she wants everyone to feel okay before they leave, and people do in fact work things out before going home, probably not because of her statement so much as how it is part of a series of statements they have heard and experiences they have shared within Write On!

When people feel a sense of belonging in an organization, they can take more psycho-social risks because, even if their behavior leads to conflict or some other undesirable situation, there is promise of people trying to understand the intentions behind their actions, accept their apologies if they do unintentional harm, support them in their efforts to learn from mistakes or the results of actions with uncertain outcomes, and continue to accept them. There is an attempt to understand the intentions behind gestures and more generally behind actions that are taken. When Terance walks out of the meeting, time is taken to question not only what he has done or its implications but why and what the implications are of his intentions.

When there is a sense of belonging in an institution (i.e., it is a norm for members of the organization), negative feedback is specific to particular behaviors, not to individuals in their entireties. The young woman who sat next to me, like Jade and Edith whom I interviewed, have negative reactions

to specific behaviors of the young men in this organization, but they both relate and refer to them as colleagues, friends, and "family".

*Processes*

Developing a sense of belonging entails developing an understanding of one's roles in a community, becoming comfortable with and/or adapting these roles, and developing an understanding of how one's behaviors are perceived by other people in the community. This awareness, which comes from attending to other people's perspectives, is helpful as a step toward building stronger relationships and otherwise being assertive. When I use the word assertive, I mean asking for what one needs in a manner that effectively elicits support and setting boundaries for oneself and others in relation to oneself (Women Defending Ourselves, unpublished).

The roles in an active learning community evolve over time and adapt to changes in the composition and needs of community members. In order to become comfortable with one's role in the context of a community, communication has to take place. The process of developing belonging is thus dependent on the development and practice of communication skills (which are a subset of outcomes along the Competence dimension), and reflection about what needs to be communicated and how it can be communicated in order to satisfy one's social needs and desires.

In addition to communication skills, assertiveness techniques are possible outcomes of competence development that coincide with the

processes of developing both agency and a sense of belonging. These include ways of organizing one's thoughts and approaching situations. The goal-setting exercise that Amara was teaching Vets at MISTICS provides an example. More explicit examples come from experiential education programs that specifically offer training in assertiveness techniques, conflict resolution, and/or self defense.

In the CBOs, youth are encouraged to express how they feel as well as how they think. Furthermore, that information is treated as important whether for an article or dance performance, or as something they are sharing that allows others to know them better. Perhaps it is even more important for kids who do not have a lot of material objects to share, to find their feelings and ideas valued by others. It allows them contribute to a community and be valued as resources. Developing a sense of belonging involves sharing power, and pooling resources.

*Outcomes*

The benefits of developing a sense of belonging include mutually beneficial relationships. Collectively, these relationships form a network of interdependence that provides opportunities and support for its members. In addition, participants benefit from living through experiences of developing relationships that are supportive and respectful; It allows them to deepen their understandings of how they can become a friend, mentor, teacher,

student, mentee, co-worker, colleague and/or family member in relationships that are mutually beneficial for those involved.

When Dewey talks about the principle of continuum, he explains that one of the ways in which the quality of an educational experience should be understood is in terms of how the experience opens doors to future learning (1938). Youth and staff at the CBOs suggest that members gain confidence in their ability to develop meaningful relationships and co-develop a social system that is supportive of its members, and that this confidence (an outcome of belonging) feeds the process of further developing a sense of belonging as time goes on.

The development of belonging has effects on groups within organizations, organizational culture, and individuals. For groups within organizations, developing a sense of belonging can reduce stress and increase productivity, making membership more attractive for both insiders and outsiders.

*Support Mechanisms*

The development of belonging among youth is supported by staff and other senior members of the learning communities serving as role models -- showing how positive and respectful interactions can take place even in the face of difficult emotions. People are both encouraged and enabled to practice communication skills including active listening and expressing ideas that are personal. Criticism is constructive. Conflict resolution is valued. People

agree to make a strong effort to understand and relate to one another with respect.

Staff and youth support the development of a general sense of belonging by being authentic (acting in accordance with their beliefs, acknowledging weaknesses and not trying to hide behind facades of authority), being consistent in their behavior (enforcing rules -- which means the fewer rules the easier this is), showing compassion and respect simultaneously, and setting boundaries (which protects personal space and delineates roles). Each of these actions is valuable both because of the immediate consequences and because it helps establish norms and produce the curriculum that is picked up through contagion and learned collaterally (see Dewey, 1938).

**Competence**

Fostering the development of student competence is an idea familiar to most types of education. In experiential education, multiple areas of competence are developed (e.g., social, physical, academic, artistic). In doing so, experiential education addresses all areas of Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences -- linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and personal (1993). In the experiential education model, competence is developed both by individuals and by groups (communities of learners) of which the individuals are members.

*July 10, 1995 -- Mosaic Center for the Performing Arts*
*First Full Day of the Summer Institute*

*There are 22 students standing in two rows, one behind the other, facing the front. From downstairs, I could feel part of the building move under their feet. The teacher asks individuals to clap the beat of the music. He has one line at a time practice what he shows them. As the teacher moves to the back row, the entire front row turns itself around to face the center of the teaching. I take this as a sign of their engagement.*

*. . . After lunch, it's time for Comparative Study. Jonathan asks what "stream of consciousness" means. Students don't answer. Jonathan turns to a fellow staff member and asks for a stream of consciousness recitation about the word blue. Students are writing lists of words and ideas that come to mind as they each think about a dream they have. Marcus, Sarah's co-director of the Institute, asks a follow-up question, "If you're not using thinking, what are you using?"*

*"It's from the gut," someone offers.*

*Marcus says that he would have responded differently to the request for a stream of conscious recitation about the word blue. He says that his response would have been different but equally valid.*

*Jonathan asks what tools performers use. He then asks Marcus, to tell the class one of the tools that he is using in a play that he is currently acting in. "Voice," he replies. Jonathan asks for Marcus to recite a line from the play. Marcus expresses an interest to do more but acknowledges that this is Jonathan's "thing." Jonathan says that's all he wants -- "a concrete example from a real human being in front of us."*

*Jonathan tells students to draw on their experiences, " . . . Describe in your own words... There's no right or wrong way to describe something that you've done. . . . Be sincere," he instructs them. He asks students to make lists of the resources they need to achieve their dreams. He puts on the board, " Resources: People, things, time, place/space."*

*"Are they all up there?" he asks. "Let us know if you're not done because we don't want to leave anyone behind." When young people do not understand a what Jonathan means by what he writes on the board, he leads students through a process of constructing the meaning.*

For a performance, every student is called upon to demonstrate what has been taught, and the group shares in a more positive experience when each individual is able to succeed. This provides incentive for students to learn from and teach one another. The focus on performance is not individualized, competitive and as a means of judging or sorting; rather it is a show of competence and the product of collaboration, integrated into the education process and a means of providing education and entertainment. These ideas are not restricted to the performing arts examples of experiential education. In a wilderness survival course, individuals have an incentive to help each other learn the material so they can rely on each other. Groups are called upon to work together. The joy of success is what lies at the completion of a task well-done rather than the more indirect benefit that results from being assigned a grade or ranking for a performance.

In the examples above, participants are learning dance steps and vocabulary, how dance and music go together, and how they can capitalize on the use of internal resources to enhance their performance ability. Throughout the summer, participants not only learned the specific dance steps, theatrical techniques and words to songs, they also learned about the inter-relationships among art forms and how these patterns relate to human experience. They learned from explicit instruction, collaterally, and through peer interactions that took the form of mentorship.[ix] The competence they

gained in relating to one another as well as those areas of competence that are specific to individual classes are described by the youth themselves.[x]

The development of competence is intertwined with the development of agency and belonging. In situations where students are better able to take charge of and invest in their own education (i.e., have developed agency), they are able to get more out of the opportunities to develop competence. This is a shared belief by the staff at Mosaic, who encourage youth to get what they can out of the institute by investing in it, taking some risks, allowing themselves to make connection with what matters to them (e.g., their personal dreams as performers).

Participants seem to gain more competence in settings that encourage the development of a sense of agency and belonging. Meanwhile, there are outcomes of competence that feed back into the processes of developing agency and belonging. Social skills, communications skills, and assertiveness skills are among them.

*Processes*

The process of developing competence is one of learning and practicing the performance of tasks. In the case of higher level skills -- those that are not the most basic within an area of competence -- the process also involves reflecting on how to improve one's level of performance. The acquisition of knowledge, internalization of ideas, and integration information, are each

parts of the process. Competence is developed through activities that include doing, seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking.

*Outcomes*

At the simplest level, the outcome of developing competence is the increased abilities of individuals and groups to perform tasks or achieve goals. Developing competence in a field also implies developing a greater ability to apply skills and knowledge to a wider range of circumstances and situations, and the development of a deeper understanding of issues that pertain to the area of practice in which competence is being developed. This allows for greater flexibility and an increased ability of persons with greater competence to respond to novel or complex situations. The development of competence also serves as a building block for further development of both competence in that area and in general.

*Support Mechanisms*

A environment in which people are exposed to new ideas and information as well as reasons to learn is more likely to support the development of competence than one in which people are neither stimulated nor motivated to learn. It is helpful for there to be established areas of competence that people are expected to be able to develop in an organization, and information accessible to learners about these areas of competence, in

addition to there being information about methods for developing proficiency in these areas.

Effective guidance in the process of reflecting on practice also supports the development of competence. This usually comes in the form of someone posing challenging questions to facilitate the process of critically evaluating what can be learned from a situation. It also includes providing feedback that is helpful to the learning communities and their members -- criticism that is constructive and assessment that is formative. Other features of the learning environments observed in this study that seem to promote competence development are a norm of cooperation, and a norm of people being encouraged to take risks that is attached to people being allowed to develop confidence that they will not be punished if they are unable to meet a personal challenge. There are consequences of not achieving a goal; They are organic -- resulting from the goal not being met. What is important to support development of competence is that additional penalties are not imposed that would take away from future learning -- for instance someone being humiliated by peers or teachers and thereby developing self-doubt (Dweck, 1986).

**In Summary**

Agency, Belonging, and Competence are mutually reinforcing dimensions of student experience. Discussing the processes, outcomes and supporting mechanisms for each, one at a time, is intended to generate a

clearer understanding of the conceptualization presented in this paper. The pedagogical principles of experiential education (including those called Authenticity, Active Learning, Drawing on Experience, and Connecting to the Future), and certain foreground and background characteristics of the learning environment (specific values, resources and behaviors) form the connective tissue that promotes the development student ABCs. When experiential education works, everybody develops ABCs -- including those who are employed as teachers.

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[i] Earlier versions of the framework, definitions and descriptions in this section have been published elsewhere (Carver, 1995; Carver, 1996).

[ii] All names are pseudonyms.

[iii] The connections were made clear to me by Milbrey McLaughlin who provided essential guidance for my work.

[iv] The discussion of the following example along with a more in depth look at how the material relates to works by John Dewey and Kurt Hahn will be published later this year (Carver, in press).

[v] See Kalisch, 1979, Chapter 5 for more on this topic.

[vi] This premise is substantiated by Kurt Lewin's research in social psychology (1952).

[vii] This statement is substantiated by the works of Kurt Lewin (1952) and Carol Dweck (1986).

[viii] When talking about these outbursts, the young women refer to the young men as boys. Depending on the conversation (context, audience and speaker) young people are referred to by insiders as youth, young adults, girls, boys, women and men.

[ix] See Dewey, 1938, for an explanation of "collateral learning."
[x] As illustrated in a chapter on youth voices in Education For All: From Experience, Through Guidance and Reflection (forthcoming).

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